

A landscape of religious diversity

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Indonesia has the largest population of Muslims in the world. Christians make up about 8 percent of Indonesia's population of 230 million. It is a country with a long tradition of tolerance and coexistence among people of different faiths.

Looking out the window from my 22nd-story hotel room in central Jakarta, I take in various buildings that represent different religions. On my right is the largest mosque in Indonesia, the Masjid Istiqlal, and next to it stands the Catholic Cathedral with its neo-Gothic architecture.

In front of me are modern high-rises -- the epitome of the religion called capitalism -- and beside these buildings sprawl slums which highlight the inequities of this religion.

New to this vista is the recently built Colosseum-like Reformed Millennium Cathedral, an evangelical Protestant megachurch that seats 8,000 and houses a seminary, a museum and a university.

According to Rev. Stephen Tong (69), the preacher of Chinese heritage who designed this cathedral and founded the Reformed Evangelical Church of Indonesia in 1989, the new house of worship is a symbol of religious tolerance and freedom in Indonesia.

Rev. Tong remains faithful to the Indonesian Constitution which guarantees the right to worship to the officially recognized religions in the country, notwithstanding past violence Islamic hardliners have committed on Christian churches.

On the evening of Dec. 5, thousands of Chinese-Indonesian Christians from different Chinese-language churches in Jakarta gathered to celebrate Christmas at the new cathedral.

The scale of the event was quite impressive: more than 4,000 worshippers turned up, almost filling the Messiah Hall which accommodates 4,500. This combined church service was organized by the Communion of Chinese Churches in Indonesia (CCCI).

CCCI was established in 2007 and counts dozens of Chinese evangelical churches in Indonesia among its members.

Although a recent report released by the Wahid Institute has pointed to a rise in violent incidents related to religious freedom, large-scale interreligious violence and terrorism carried out by fanatic religious groups has diminished under the current government.

That a celebration of such scale could be organized, and that Chinese Christians could freely congregate as a religious ethnic group, are both testaments to the changes that have taken place in

post-Soeharto, democratizing Indonesia. Nevertheless, the Christmas service organizers were still very cautious: the event was announced quietly without public banners outside the church and security was tight.

Chinese churches were united under the ethnically exclusive Synod of the Tiong Hoa Kie Tok Kauw Hwee in the 1930s. However, after independence and after its members opted for Indonesian citizenship, Chinese churches decided to relabel the groups using the ethnically neutral Gereja Kristen Indonesia (GKI, or Indonesian Christian Church).

The name change marked a transformation of identity from overseas Chinese to Indonesian nationals. It also removed the exclusivity of the church and opened the door to members of other ethnic groups to join. And not all Chinese churches joined the Synod of GKI; other independent evangelical Chinese churches still catered mainly to the Chinese community.

The evangelical churches (*gereja-gereja injili*) in Indonesia are markedly different from the evangelical right of the United States. While US evangelical congregations are made up of mostly the charismatic and Pentecostal denominations, the evangelical churches in Indonesia inherited the Dutch Calvinist traditions and distinguish themselves from the Pentecostals. Rev. Tong, though an evangelical (albeit not a member of CCCI), is highly critical of charismatic practices.

The view from my hotel presented a beautiful landscape of religious diversity in Indonesia: the Muslim mosque, the Catholic cathedral and the Protestant church all co-existing within a few kilometers of each other.

Past religious violence were mostly caused by clashes between different social classes and ethnic groups rather than by religion itself, except in recent years when religious hardliners have committed crimes in the name of God.

For people of different faiths to live together, they need mutual understanding and respect. Intrafaith dialogue such as those between the evangelicals and the charismatic, and those between the Catholics and the Protestants are just as important as inter-faith dialogue.

The call for unity should not only be within a certain faith or community, it should be an aspiration for all religions and all Indonesians. It is only through such unity that we can find a colossal strength in religious social capital to rebuild Indonesia.

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